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Citation of Maternal Narratives: A Butlerian reading of Janet Frame's Autobiography

Abstract:

Narratives express and constrain what we might say about experience. In this paper, I want to explain how Janet Frame (1924-2004) was conditioned by her mother to learn and use pre-agreed narratives of family history, the accurate performance of which became the condition of the author's validity as a family member. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler on the citational self, I aim to show the tension between Frame's desire to become a writer of her own making and the constraint found in her early environment, in particular her mother's wish that her daughter should stick to ritualistic repetitions of established narratives. To do so, I will chronicle Frame's developmental journey, described in her autobiography, and using a Butlerian framework, I will explain how Frame finds a distinctive way to cite her own subjectivity. Beyond tension, beyond the stasis of repeated narrative, the author timidly at first then overtly transgresses the maternal injunction for correct citation.

Article:

Citation of Maternal Narratives: A Butlerian reading of Janet Frame's Autobiography ¹

Janet Frame (1924-2004) is famous for her creative rendering of the lived experience of melancholia. The popularity of her writing was felt especially amongst female readers who found in Frame's work the expression of their own silent suffering. Her three-part autobiography (*To the Is-Land*, 1982; *An Angel at My Table* and *The Envoy From Mirror City*, 1984a/b)² records her developmental path, from birth to accomplished writer, and describes a tension between a perceived 'core' and a familial programming she strongly resisted from an early age. The portrayal of her developmental years suggests that her mother was strongly invested in the ritualistic revival of the past as the only mode of self-expression. Frame describes how she was conditioned to learn and use pre-agreed narratives of family history, the accurate performance of which became the condition to the author's validity as a family member. Hence, Frame's autobiographical work lends itself readily to a Butlerian reading of the author as the agent of re-citation.

Judith Butler demonstrated that to have a sense of identity the individual must do two things: one, integrate and use the narratives that typify the particular identity the speaker is seeking validation for and two, repeat this narrative in a quasi-ritualistic fashion in order to re-iterate her³ claim to that identity. This turns the essentialist model upside down. In *To the Is-land*, Janet Frame tells us she wanted to 'be a poet' from an early age. Part of the autobiography deals with unpacking her journey towards poet-hood. In doing so, two major models offer themselves, the essentialist model and the environmental model. I am arguing that Frame will consider both models as possible explanations and eventually settle for a third one, the citational model, because it offers the author a better platform from which to write. The essentialist model explains Frame's poetic self by proving her innate melancholic penchant for example, or by saying that an unusually sensitive nature destined her to become that poet. Butlerian theory says the opposite. The parameters by which the poet is identified as a poet (melancholic, sensitive) must be integrated *after* her coming into the world and cited

repeatedly in order to justify her poetic self. Butler is proposing that outside or before 'citation', that is before or outside Janet Frame's declaration 'I am a poet', there is no such thing as 'poet identity', no inner self to discover, nor naturalness of being we may observe and objectify. Frame's failure to cite herself correctly, that is failure to approximate recognisable narratives of poet-hood would result in the non viability of Frame as a poet. The Butlerian framework is renowned for its complex and far reaching unpacking of the relationship between identity and citation. I am hoping that some of its complexities will transpire from my analysis of Janet Frame's encounter with self-citation below. While Frame was obviously not influenced by Butler, her autobiographical work nevertheless engages with issues of identity, authenticity and citation.

The application of a Butlerian rhetoric to autobiographical work has been suggested before. Adapting Butler's work on gender identity, Sidonie Smith puts forward 'autobiographical performativity' (1998: 109), as literary practice where 'autobiographical telling is not a 'self-expressive act [...]. There is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating. [...] the interiority of self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling'(108-9). Smith critiques autobiographical writing that makes-believe in the autobiographer's real interiority. Instead she supports the idea of autobiographical performativity as a more authentic process. Smith objects that to pretend one can reveal one's true inner self re-enforces 'the foundational myth of autobiographical storytelling as self-expressive of an autonomous individualism' (114). She insists on the effect of a literary *mise-en-scène* of interaction between writer, socio-political environment and reader. In what she calls 'tactical dis/identifications', Smith points to the importance of censorship in autobiographical work; the autobiographer 'adjusts, redeploys, resists, transforms discourses of autobiographical identity (111). As we shall see in Frame's work, autobiographical performativity becomes the site of both actualisation and resistance of self. Indeed, Butler's academic (and political) engagement with finding an epistemic framework for those denied 'cultural legitimacy and intelligibility' (Lloyd, 2207: 51) befits Frame's dedication to finding correct self-expression in a hostile environment⁴. Why hostile? Because, from an early age, the young Frame will

show a notable desire to voice aspects of human experience that resist representation. Hostility is social hostility towards certain impolite topics Janet is dissuaded from investigating (her sister's sexual life for example); it is also Frame's own hostility, or maybe more accurately frustration with a language that resists that which she wishes to explain. From the 'Why was the world, why was the world.' (1990: 131) at the beginning of her autobiography to the Envoy's long wait for her to deliver the content of her mind (1990: 435) on the last page, the writer's anxious engagement with meaning permeates throughout. This is where citation comes into play. Butler's work suggests that to say who she is, the author does not simply state a fact but rather cites the facts that have come to make who she is meaningful. The author 'cites' herself. But the leap from speaker to author requires the integration, understanding, and in Frame's case manipulation, of the mechanics of 'citation', in particular how the facts cited have been forcibly imposed in what Butler (2004) calls a 'sociality' that the writer is born into. When Frame tells us about her birth, she does exactly that. The narrative of her birth is not simply stating the fact of birth but citing a well rehearsed narrative about her coming to existence that she has learnt (we will return to it more fully later). Frame's autobiography unravels the actors of 'sociality' and the dynamic of 'force' she is subjected to. Citation then is the process by which Frame at once spells out those defining elements that make and break her and finds singularity in the literary treatment of that process.

Frame's citational narrative points to several citational themes. I will deal with two. One is the citation of genealogy that Frame examines under the term 'Ancestors', and the other deals with mental illness. Frame capitalises all referents to ancestry. Two ideas converge in this capitalisation: the young Janet's sense of awe for Ancestors and the literary manipulation of this awe, via parody of the importance awarded Ancestors. Hence, self-making becomes a literary exercise where two contradictory narratives meet: past/Ancestral and present/authorial, her 'Was-land' and her 'Is-land'. Two, the question of her schizophrenia, a label she carries until the diagnosis is reversed in her late thirties, acts as a pivotal issue when it comes to Frame's views on the inherence of self. She initially embraced the diagnosis of schizophrenia as justification for the poetic self. The reversal of diagnosis

has a profound effect on Frame. It eventually leads her to abandon all essentialist constructions to explain who she is, including schizophrenia, in favour of a citational model.

1- Developmental years: learning to cite maternal narratives

From the beginning, Janet Frame expresses an ambivalence regarding the truth-value of her autobiographical work. Taking 'second place' behind 'The Ancestors', she ponders over 'the myth and the reality' of those who preceded her (1990: 7). Her hesitancy echoes Jerome Bruner's assessment of the 'narrative creation of self' (2002: 63) and illustrates how narrative both expresses and constrains what we might say about personal experience. Bruner's narrative theory nods to several theorists (Freud and Descartes amongst others) and proposes that 'there is no such thing as an intuitively obvious and essential self to know [...]. Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future' (64). The making of one's self through narrative is conditional upon a myriad of self-making rules, established by outside forces (cultural for instance), and from which one organises a meaningful self. To achieve a close description of who-she-really-is Janet Frame resorts to recording a mixture of facts and memories of facts which, she tells us, originate somewhere '[f]rom the first place of liquid darkness, within the second place of air and light' (1990: 7) and reaches towards a 'Third Place', that of her mythical self. Her 'true' self then should be situated between the moment of conception and that of writing about herself, with writing as the ultimate destination of her self, and her autobiography as the repository of her authenticity.

No sooner has she asserted autobiography as the ultimate self-making experience, than Frame finds that any definition of who she *is* will far exceed the written recollection of events between her birth and the moment of writing. She locates the birth of her identity in a time that precedes her very existence, a time when she is without agency. The title of the first volume of the autobiography, *To the Is-Land*, captures the dynamic of a narrative of self-actualisation that requires her to acknowledge the place of the 'Ancestors' (or the 'Was-

land') in the formation of her 'Is-land', what Bruner describes as 'what we think *they* think we ought to be like' (2002: 66). Frame is frustrated by the need to forfeit control over the act of self-making, and the fact that writing her autobiography is from the start tied to someone else's agency. As Bruner's quote suggests, her annoyance is to have to contend with the gaze of the critical 'other' who judges and limits her freedom. Beyond the constraint of objectification also lies a more fundamental desire, the yearning for a self that would be self-reflexive, self-created, and for the sole purpose of self-making. On the contrary, self exceeds her own lifetime and self-making retro-activates a time that preceded her coming to existence. She thus opens her autobiographical journey, reluctantly acknowledging that she begins 'In the Second Place' (1990: 7).

Frame is concerned that the place she comes from, her 'Was-land', is also the place where her existence is denied, the place where she was not. She seems to find intolerable the thought that her very being might originate in her not-being, in the being of others. As the narrative of her early years progresses, the tension between wanting to find in the past some justification for who she is, while at the same time desiring to liberate her self from that past, is increasingly felt. The autobiographical narrative progressively reveals tactics the author uses to both acknowledge the Was-land and to by-pass 'Ancestral' agency towards the coveted 'Is-land'.

The tension between the two is a key feature of Janet Frame's stylistic tactics; the autobiography is the privileged ground where the author sets up a dialogue between the present and the past. She thus asks the question: how will my character actualise herself in relation to the Ancestors? The answer necessitates identification with the permitted (Ancestral) narrative *and* with the prohibited (authorial) self. This is not without recalling Freud and Butler's work on melancholia. The expression of self carries a tension located, according to Butler, in the 'melancholic incorporation'¹⁵ (Butler, 1997: 134) of that which must be censored in order to satisfy self-expression. Throughout the autobiographical trilogy, and further in other fictional work, 'the lost object continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive identification' (Butler, 1997: 134). The 'nature' and literary treatment of this object is what interests me.

Janet Frame's mother is the prime catalyst of Frame's tension. She teaches her daughter how to speak the family tongue in what we could call an 'Ancestral narrative of self'. In so doing Janet's mother also becomes the voice that must be censored if Janet Frame is to find her authorial voice. The autobiography is a testimony of the relationship between family history-making and self-making. Frame tells us how her mother has an obsessive attention for the 'family' and all things familial.

Mother, a rememberer and talker, [...] remembering her past as an exile remembers her homeland; Mother in a constant state of family immersion [...] and immersion so deep that it achieved the opposite effect of making her seem to be seldom at home, in the present tense, or like an unreal person with her real self washed away. (1990: 8)

The children perceive their mother's immersion in the family as a maternal frenzy unleashed in order to re-actualise memories of her own family life and of cultural events that marked her early years. The former is remembered with elation (listing the Ancestors and their actions, performing acts that repeat ancestral acts, etc.). The latter, recalling natural and social catastrophes (earthquakes, slavery and the demise of the Titanic for example), are remembered with dread. Hence, the mother's Ancestral narrative is endowed with attributes that typify it: magic and wonders on the one hand, and doom and gloom on the other. The high-low character of the past is taught to the children who are requested to memorise and recite particular events in theatrical performances where the Ancestors have centre-stage. Frame observes the sharp contrast between two emotional states associated with their theatrical performances of the past: on the one hand passions are magnified in 'live' performances, through ritualised bodily gestures and tones of voice; on the other, the children's perception of performance is of a haunting, a possession of the mother by 'the space that another world and another time occupied in [their] mother's life', a time 'remembered as paradisal' (1990: 8), and the ritual incarnation of which Frame must escape in the search for her true self. The mother thus presents them with two 'voices' to speak from: one 'voice of mystery and wonder' and one 'panicked, speaking in her earthquake-and-lightening voice' (1990: 29). In other words, euphoria and despair are offered as *the* two

voices from which the children can cite and authenticate their selves. Caught in the maternal polarisation of subjective expression, Frame then questions the possibility of autobiographical innovation, aside of the two voices she is provided with.

Frame's scepticism regarding authorial autonomy in the making of the autobiographical self recalls Butlerian theory. Butler proposes that the conditions of one's identity 'are from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author' (2004: 1). She refers not only to social networks as the site where one's identity is lived but also to the social genealogy that participated in the making of those networks. Networks and their genealogy constitute the framework that regulates the expression of individual identity. The 'citational self' should be conceived in terms of a 'doing' of citations that precede the existence of 'self'. The self is a consequence of citation and it is the repetitive iteration of citation that creates in the individual the illusion of a constancy of self, the false impression that she indeed 'owns' a stable self. Janet Frame's construction of the autobiographical self makes this clear from the start. The author records how her mother frames the story of her birth with an obvious concern for its future insertion in the Ancestral narrative. The mother picks and censors elements of the birth experience that will confirm her (and by extension her daughter) as having made history at several levels. Frame tells us in *To the Is-Land* that she was delivered by the first female medical graduate in New Zealand, that her twin, unnamed, died after a few weeks (repeating the great-grandmother's loss of two sets of twins), that she was 'always hungry' but that maternal milk was so abundant it fed both herself and other babies. Frame thus makes of her beginnings one that falls within Ancestral narratives of self. Mediated by her mother, Frame's coming to existence is an experience of historical, genealogical and heroic proportions, an experience in which her mother is the central character. Frame's birth is clearly not about baby Janet but about validating the mother as an instrument of the country's history, the subject of misfortune and courage. In turn, Frame adopts her mother's narratives to cite her self until, faced with the task of writing her autobiography, the author is confronted with the question of authorial agency in self-making.

2- Citation and transgression of maternal narratives

Butler provides an answer to the issue of agency that is, up to a point, persuasive. On the one hand, she rejects the possibility of an innate core self that the individual discovers and which finds expression through speech. The types of narratives we choose to cite are forcibly cited, because they are 'deeply imbricated in relations of domination, reprimand and control [...] and they are inescapable' (Lloyd, 2007: 63). On the other, she also rejects the idea that the environment fully determines one's self. The self then is neither self-determined (an act of free will) nor fully environmentally determined. Rather, it is partly determined by the environment, but because determination is not random, partly motivated by the individual too. Butler maintains the idea that the individual 'has' agency but critiques the idea that we 'have' autonomy. She substitutes the image of a self that would *have* autonomous agency in favour of one that would be *constituted*. In other words, our actions are not the outcome of natural inclinations we possess, nor are they the passive imprinting of behaviour. In being constituted, the self is located in a temporal framework that is constrained by permitted significations that mutate through time and space and that depend upon the repetition of citation for its stability. The self is initiated by the (outer) enforced obligation not only to 'have a self', but to have a self that is recognisable against a set of criteria. The individual's (inner) effort at having a self, that is the individual's attempt to self-enforce norms, becomes the sign that the self exists. Importantly, the self is enforced from without and inner enforcement signifies ownership of the self. In Butler's words: 'the subject emerges both as the *effect* of a prior power and as the *condition of possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency.' (1997: 15-6). Butler then conceives of the self as a reflexive act where self and self-making are not separated but constituted at the same time. The moment the individual is subjected to the norms of self-making and 'acquires' a self is also the moment this 'served'-subject resists those norms.

As we will now see, in Janet Frame's autobiographical work, the author finds herself in a constant battle between capturing a fixed sense of her self for the purpose of autobiographical self-making (by re-visiting, I have suggested, the maternal norms that constitute who she is) and using constraint to reflexively constrain maternal narratives. While

Butler does not suggest that constraint can deliberately and wilfully be turned against the forces that constrain the self and that participated in its making, she does suggest that the foundation of agency lies in the moment the individual acquires self *and* enforcement of self. The author's agency is located in the repetition of iterated norms, those very norms that make and censor the self, because parody creates a differential between original and parodied performance. The differential created between the 'original' norms of self (those last iterated) and the 'new' iterated self (the self iterated now) opens a space for new constitutions. Differential then, is where I will locate Frame's agency.

Frame's realisation that self-making is entwined with issues of constraint is evident from the start of *To the Is-Land* and throughout her autobiography.

Where in my earlier years time had been horizontal, progressive, day after day, year after year, with memories being true personal history known by dates and specific years, or vertical, with events stacked one upon the other, [...] the adolescent time now became a whirlpool, and so the memories do not arrange themselves to be observed and written about, they whirl, propelled by a force beneath [...] denying the existence of a 'pure' autobiography [...]. (1990: 131)

I suggested that Frame's 'discovery' of authorial agency lies in her understanding and manipulation of what Butler will later call 'citation'. Frame's apprehension of 'citation' was in great parts facilitated by her knowledge of another theoretical framework, that of psychoanalysis. She was well versed in Freudian concepts, since she studied psychoanalytic theory and its application to aesthetic material at university and later voluntarily sought psychotherapy. The authorial intention to use the psychoanalytic frame to gain critical distance and cite her self becomes more explicit in the second and third volumes of the autobiography. But the elements of a psycho-analysis of self found in *To the Is-Land* easily allow a historicising of Frame's development towards a citational self. The author repeats narrative *forms* remembered from childhood, indeed reiterating maternal narratives in a quasi-parodic fashion, and at the same time distinguishes herself from her

mother through narrative *content*, that is by intentionally selecting content to create a differential that will lead her towards poetic selfhood. This is better explained by turning to Frame's text.

As we saw earlier, Frame identifies the Ancestral narrative as that which constrains her, with euphoria and despair as the two permitted voices of self-expression. She tells us that from the age of three, she has an emerging awareness of the maternal imposition upon her own agency to make her self, but also of a nascent resistance to maternal narratives.

I had my first conscious feeling of an outside sadness, or it seemed to come from the outside [...]. I felt a burden of sadness and loneliness as if something had happened or begun and I knew about it. I don't think I had yet thought of myself as a person looking out at the world; until then I felt I was the world. In listening to the wind and its sad song, I knew I was listening to a sadness that had no relation to me, which belonged to the world. (1990: 13)

Frame is, at three, establishing the boundaries between her self and the world. The experience she describes recalls what has been termed 'incorporation' in psychoanalysis, where the individual 'swallows' outside events that become integral parts of their character. Before this point, Frame had referred several times to the process of incorporation. From birth, she (repeating her mother's words) describes herself as 'the baby who was always hungry' (1990: 12) with a mother whose abundance of milk enabled her to feed both the little Janet and other babies. Her first memories, from the age of two, are of the world outside and of her fascination with the milking of Betty the family cow (1990: 11). The focus of her fascination changes at three years old into understanding 'the cow with skin-covered machinery working at both ends' (1990: 12). Betty is also the cow that later has to be given up when the family moves to a different town. Frame's first experience of sadness is thus contextualised as a swallowing of something that is alien to her (the loss of maternal milk to other babies, the loss of ingested food to digestion, the loss of Betty, etc) and suggests her melancholic states are learned states of being, indeed 'melancholic incorporations' to borrow

Butler's term. Furthermore, her observation of the cow enables her to conceive of a way out. Bettie is mentioned alongside the mother and there is little doubt that Frame is likening her mother to a cow, not so much as an insult (although the interpretation is possible) but rather as a nurturer (milk) and as the regulator of her daughter's internal processing of outside 'things'. The mother feeds her at a corporeal but also at a psychological level, and codes the manner in which ingested 'things' are allowed to make their way out.⁶ Alongside the description of maternally coded performances of Ancestral narratives, Frame also describes quite bluntly her early years' fascination for things to do with toilet-training, her excitement over learning words and the 'travelling network of words' (1990: 13) exchanged by adults above her head. From the age of three till the age of eight, she repeatedly describes events through which she tells us of her effort to self-actualise: the need to appropriate her mother tongue, learning the modalities of correct form and of critical thinking, incorporating knowledge and expelling its digested content in a form that will make her acceptable. In short, her childhood narrative is one of adaptation to constraint and constraint the condition to the exciting process of meaning-making, of making sense of the world and self.

Frame's appropriation and mastery of the Ancestral narrative and move towards a 'truer' narrative of self (in the sense of a self she actively identifies with) becomes evident at age eight. At that point of her autobiography, maternal compulsion to repeat the past has been established as a subjective ploy that gives the mother her *raison d'être*. From the children's perspective, it is also the obstacle to self-actualisation. Their loyalty to the mother's idealisation of the past comes to an abrupt end when the visit of the grandmother, a possessive and judgemental woman, exposes the maternal paradise as a sham.

She [the mother] knew that we knew now that her own mother had not been so perfect, after all, that she was just like all mothers around, [...] and when she told us about the birds of the air, flying down to feed from Grandma Godfrey's hand, Mother was really talking about herself [...].
(1990: 58)

Frame's mother, torn between living the Ancestral lie and reality, between allegiance to her children and her Ancestor (her own mother), adopts a passive attitude and becomes depressed. At the age of eight, Frame suddenly realises the true origin of family narratives. She witnesses her grandmother's contempt for her own daughter, in stark contrast with her mother's narratives of wonders, magical Ancestors and royal genealogies. The undoing of the Ancestral narrative coincides with Janet's understanding of the function of the narrative. The moment is also defining in the manner Janet begins to grasp the motivations behind her mother's chosen identity and more importantly the mechanics that enabled her to construct a narrative of self. In the hope of compensating for the Ancestral shortcomings, her mother resorted to infantile tactics, recreating her 'family' through her children and inviting them to take their parts in the fairy tale. The maternal ploy is self-reparative and aims to compensate her grief for the missing parental framework. We can speculate that these reparative narratives originated at the very point of lack, when the child she was invented a world of imaginary characters that could support her development better than the real ancestors. But while the creation of the ideal family counterbalanced to some degree the emotional damage experienced by the mother as a child, the imaginary family could not participate in a structuring of the child's self towards autonomy, by virtue of being self-reflexive. In the theory of sexual development, Freud proposes that the individual gains a sense of identity by having one 'thing' lost (represented by the mother) and one 'thing' gained (represented by the father). It seems to me that Janet's mother refuses to acknowledge the thing lost in a quasi melancholic fashion, suggested by Janet Frame's depiction of her mother as a character committed to keeping the Ancestral narrative unchanged. Nothing is lost, but nothing is gained either. This is interesting in relation to Janet Frame's own use of melancholia in her writing. The mother's desire for self-sufficiency in the act of self-making recalls the question Frame is asking herself at the start of her autobiography: how will my character actualise herself in relation to the Ancestors? The concern over the legacy left by the past, the desire to sever the link from bad blood is resolved by the mother in theatrical moments compensating her for familial lack. The tactic is passed onto and repeated by Frame, whose phenomenal memory and focus on poetic details mirrors her mother's own obsessive listing of genealogy and poetic despair. Like her mother, Frame oscillates from an

early age between elated states of emotions when the theatre of good Ancestry is performed, and sadness when loss is known. But as an author, Frame will also go one step further and seek a stylistic framework that will allow her to keep family ties *and* expel them at the same time. So while Frame will become an expert at subverting the Ancestral narrative, preserving those narratives also plays a key part in her writing: 'I may have polished this shell of memory because it is constantly with me, not because I have varnished it for display' (1990: 13). Interestingly, Frame sees the Ancestral mould (shell) as something that accompanies her (with her) rather than something that is in her, or something that shapes her or indeed something that she is. How she gets to tie the Ancestrally determined shell to some form of stable self ('constantly with me'), lies in her literary treatment ('polishing') of Ancestors.

The collapse of the maternal claim to a paradisaical past puts an end to Frame's naive repetition of maternal citation. The effect of the Ancestral fall from grace is felt at the level of Frame's style in both form and content. The grandmother's visit is a turning point and the impact on Frame's development is conveyed in a change of style, from covert rebellion to more direct attacks on the adult world. Frame begins to lay out the criteria for a narrative of self in which she actively participates. Her relationship to the past changes. She begins to acknowledge that what she calls her 'many techniques of making [...] things last' (1990: 86) are a defensive act against loss, and thus a repetition of the maternal technique. But, where her mother seeks a stability of self in the immutability and immanence of recited narratives of a lost past, Frame begins to collect, from her mother, from school, a different type of narrative of past events, those that carry within them the very idea of change. We have seen that in constructing her Ancestral narrative, Frame's mother associated her recollection of past events with high and low characteristics: high, elated in remembering Ancestors, low, gloomy in recalling historical or political events that marked her life. While the mother sees in changing worlds, lost civilisations or disappearing lands the sign of a cataclysmic end to the present and the reinforcement of loss, Frame finds 'solace in such learning of all those new worlds, of changes in the past' (1990:91). The very idea of loss soon becomes one of the criteria for a covert desire to be a poet, for poetry both preserves and transforms loss. From

that point on, autobiographical work turns away from recited maternal narratives of the past and towards an active search of self-selected criteria for what the poetic traits the young Janet ought to display: to have imagination, and to have lost 'something' (by death, by illness or by disability).

Imagination is in direct conflict with the constraint of the maternal need for citation of the past. Frame describes herself aged fourteen as 'a practical person, even writing poems which were practical, with most never failing to mention some new fact I had learned, or giving lists of people, places, colours. [...] How could I ever be a poet when I was practical, never absent-minded, I liked mathematics, and my parents were alive?' (1990: 92-3). The legacy of the maternal obligation to cite the past accurately at first appears to defeat any form of agency until Frame begins to utilise the very idea of obligation to both comply with and resist the maternal imperative. This necessitates an awareness and transformation of the meaning she imposes on her self. Being practical and attached to mundane details, and being gifted with a phenomenal memory, are defensive techniques against loss that both mother and daughter utilise: the mother as protection against the loss of the past, Frame against the loss of maternal approval. But while both use the same markers of self (Ancestral citation), the mother uses those to arrest time, to preserve, while Frame's understanding of literature allows her to navigate between preservation and transformation of the maternal narrative.

I realised that I was a dreamer, simply because everywhere reality appeared to be so sordid and wasteful, exposing dreams year by year to relentless decay. [...] In spite of my longing, I remained uncomfortably present within the world of fact, more literal than imaginative. I wanted an imagination that would inhabit a world of fact, descend like a shining light upon the ordinary life of Eden Street, and not force me to exist in an elsewhere. (1990: 99 and 101)

Hence, Frame finds she can cite herself a poet by making of her self the poet of the mundane, by writing the painful experience of the 'passing' of everyday reality, of existence

as impermanence. She thus 'discovers' at once that her literary viability lies in claiming privileged knowledge about 'loss'⁷ and understanding that this claim is a fundamental criterion for poet-hood.

Frame's 'discovery' of a more fitting self does not imply she discovers an inner self that had been waiting to be actualised. The norms of poetic selfhood (being imaginative, dreaming and aggrieved) are gathered in a methodical fashion, through the cataloguing of what constitutes poetry (the study of its form and content) and what qualifies poet-hood (by cross-referencing poets' biographies). The variance between her findings and her 'real' self are initially experienced as negation of the desired self: she simply does not resemble the poets whose work has been sanctioned. Dissatisfied with the outcome, she adapts the norms of 'poetic' to match her desired self. The question of a poetic self that would be innate or determined by maternal attachment to loss remains open to the end. : 'I often wondered in which world I might have lived my 'real' life had not the world of literature been given to me by my mother and by the school syllabus' (1990: 120). It is not clear whether Frame is implying the existence of an innate poetic self that found actualisation through chance encounter with an environment that allowed it, or whether she questions the realness of her poetic self and speculates on what other self she might have been, given the chance. In the impossibility of finding an answer to the question of origin of self, she explicitly turns to the agency of the citational self as a tactic against the constraint of the nature/nurture impasse. 'It was my insistence on bringing this world [of literature] home, rather than vanishing within it, that increased my desire to write' (1990: 120). Poetry becomes the means to resist Ancestral narratives and the foundation for self-making.

Frame clearly conveys a sense of 'physical discomfort', of feeling 'restricted', 'sealed', 'captured', 'imprisoned' and 'powerless' (1990: 116), and when she talks of a 'strong attraction to ordinary objects that might in the end become extraordinary' (1990: 117), the reference to herself is hardly disguised. Resistance comes mostly in two forms: the young Janet refuses to cite ordinary events that her mother could recuperate to confirm the extraordinariness of her past; she also substitutes events that could be perceived as extraordinary events in her life with more ordinary ones. In other words the teenager refuses

to dramatise her life and censors her speech to resist maternal appropriation: 'Mother's expectations were disappointed when she realised that she could not re-create her old memories from our new ones' (1990: 126). Censorship of content that might be recuperated to reinforce maternal narratives is accompanied with revision of style, aimed at purging her speech of any maternal influence. Frame sadistically uses her knowledge of literature to ridicule her mother's favourite poets, reducing them and her to worthlessness.

Aware now that Mother had turned increasingly to poetry for shelter, as I was doing, I, with an unfeelingness based on misery of feeling, challenged the worth of some of her beloved poets, aware that my criticism left her flushed and unhappy while I felt a savage joy at her distress. (1990: 129)

Irritated with her mother's subservience to Ancestral constraint, Frame ends *To the Is-Land* with the same question she had started with: 'Why was the world, why was the world.' (1990: 131). Her developmental path leads her to a narrative of self that refuses to belong to the mother's world and to the rejection of maternal determinism in favour of authorial agency.

By the end of the first part of her autobiography (*To the Is-Land*), the issue of family influence over her seems settled. But when she says: 'There was still the question of a disability' (1990: 132), she opens another line of enquiry into what makes her who she is. The end of *To the Is-Land* paves the way for the next parts of her autobiography, *An Angel at My Table* where Frame tackles her mental breakdown and alleged schizophrenia, and *The Envoy From Mirror City* where she settles the issue of her disability. For reasons of space, I will not develop fully Frame's narrative of the schizophrenic self⁸. However, in the context of this enquiry into the relationship between self and citation, I would like to briefly turn to the issue of the disabled self and to how Frame comes to view her schizophrenic self in citational terms.

The reversal of diagnosis in the last of the autobiographical trilogy, *The Envoy to Mirror City*, is a critical moment in Frame's life and key to her citational strategy. When she is diagnosed with schizophrenia, mental illness is perceived as a natural attribute, something that she *has*

and something that justifies what she *is*, extra-ordinary. Diagnosis reversal critically exposes what 'being schizophrenic' afforded her: 'Now, without *my* schizophrenia, I had only *my* ordinary self to use to try to explain *my* distress.' (1990: 382, my emphasis). It is notable that Frame views schizophrenia as an integral part of her self, something owned. The schizophrenic self is the opposite of the ordinary self. When she is declared sane, the diagnosis of 'not-schizophrenic' leaves Frame with a difficulty: to integrate her two selves: the self with and the self without schizophrenia. The need to integrate the two is rooted in the need to find a way to express some form of constancy of self and preserve autobiographical coherence. In my reading, Frame provides coherence by sticking to her aim of writing an autobiography that would explain her poetic ability and her literary extra-ordinariness. Schizophrenia was the only common trait she shared with some of the certified poets she studied. When the diagnosis is reversed, Frame moves away from a biological explanation of self and incorporates that part of her life in terms of a 'doing' of mental illness that she learnt for the psychiatric environment. Schizophrenia changes from something that she *has* to something that she *did* in order to get recognition and help in the pursuit of poet-hood. The issue of agency becomes once again a central preoccupation. 'No longer, I hoped, dependent on my 'schizophrenia' for comfort and attention and help, but with myself as myself, I again began my writing career.' (1990: 385). Hence, the last possible justification for a naturally determined poetic self is abandoned as we reach the last pages of the autobiography. Citation is the means by which she has answered the question of who she is. Autobiography becomes the repository of how the author actualised herself and because Frame adopted citation as her method, it is also the repository of the undoing of her autobiography. I will finish with this.

At the end of her autobiographical project, Janet Frame has come full circle. With the last line, she tells us that 'the Envoy waits' (1990: 435) for her to tell about 'Mirror City', that pre-discursive apprehension of her life that exists in her mind. But Frame is fully aware of the limitations of citation and refuses to hand over the manuscript without a note of caution that it cannot be a 'job well done'. In some 400 pages she has unpacked the journey that took her from the Was-land of her Ancestors to the Is-land of the writer she has become. Yet, she

is also aware that writing autobiography does not mean she has settled her self once and for all. Her concluding remarks are significant:

‘ Do you wish Mirror City to thrive? Remember your visit there, that wonderful view over time and space, the transformation of ordinary facts and ideas into a shining palace of mirrors? What does it matter that often as you have departed from Mirror City bearing your new, imagined treasures, they have faded in the light of this world, in their medium of language they have acquired imperfections you never intended for them, they have lost meaning that seemed, once, to shine from them and make your heart beat faster with the joy of discovery of the matched phrase or cadence, the clear insight. Do not remove yet what may be the foundation of a palace in Mirror City.’
(1990: 434)

Frame is reluctant to let go of her engagement with the writing of her life. The author engages with self-citation to the end. She is aware that the writing of her life has also been the writing of the constraint she imposed on it. Constraint has forced Mirror City to transform into an approximation of itself, a paler, more imperfect image, distorted and beaten into shape by the necessity of the autobiographical format and linguistic correctness. As a child, she resisted the necessity to re-cite maternal narratives and transformed them, creating intentional differentials where she re-invented herself. The end of the autobiography is about her owning up to an impossibility of that perfect iteration of self. Because of the transformation she imposed on Mirror City, the autobiography is both the repository of her life but also the undoing of it.

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² Quotes will be taken from the 1990 reprint of the autobiographical trilogy by The Women's Press.

³ In this piece, I am using the feminine pronoun throughout as my aim is the application of Butlerian theory to the context of Janet Frame's autobiographical work.

⁴ I thank Wendy Stainton Rogers for pointing out to me how Frame's desire to become a writer would have been perceived in the 1930s/1940s. Women were expected to be housewives or, if they insisted on having a career, they could embrace the teaching profession. Frame's decision that she would become a writer would have been seen as a

reckless and unwise project. It was therefore even more important to the young Janet to find a way to make her poet-hood intelligible to her environment.

⁵ 'Melancholic' is used in the Freudian sense of what is experienced when one refuses to let go of the lost object. Here, the lost object would be that which one loses through censorship.

⁶ Kristeva has described the role of the maternal in regulating early identifications. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

⁷ I am thinking of her character, Istina Mavet, the truth teller about death. See *Faces In the Water* (2009: vii).

⁸ For more on the use of melancholia in Janet Frame's work, read my 'Melancholia in Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water*' (2012).